

Legislators seek more input on hires

Proposal would require committee OK for select county positions

By **MATTHEW McCORMICK**
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Sullivan County legislators would have more say on county hires under a bill introduced last week by state Rep.

 **Claremont**

Larry Converse, D-Claremont.

House Bill 111 would require approval from the executive committee of the delegation and a majority vote of that committee and the board of commissioners to hire "any person for a management or superintendent position with the county."

Converse said the bill mainly is aimed at giving the delegation more control over the top job at the county nursing home, where he said leadership has changed hands too many times during the past two years.

"It just throws everything into tur-

moil," Converse said. "One day you're talking to one person and the next day you're talking to someone else who has a different way of doing things."

But county manager Ed Gil de Rubio said that management at the nursing home has been more stable than it may appear.

While there have been four people in the administrator's position since Genesis HealthCare began consulting at the facility in 2005, Gil de Rubio said that only two of those hires — Courtney Marshall and his successor, Scott

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Wojkiewicz — were meant to be permanent.

The other two, John Allard and Mary Johnson, were interim employees during the six months it took to bring Marshall on board, Gil de Rubio said.

"We could have plugged someone in right away, but instead of hiring a permanent one, we hired someone in the interim," County Commissioner Ben Nelson said. "We didn't want to get the wrong person in there."

Add three more people to the decision-making mix and that process gets longer and necessitates even more interim employees, Nelson said.

"The larger the committee, the less gets done," he said.

But Board of Commissioners Chairwoman Ethel Jarvis said more input might be a positive addition to the procedure.

"I look at it as a plus in a sense because three more people having good ideas as to who to hire, I don't see that as negative," Jarvis said.

Nelson also objected to Converse's proposal on a more fundamental level, though, saying it would give the delegates authority in the realm of day-to-day county operations, where they do not belong.

"That's what we're elected for," Nelson said. "They're elected to watch the money and vote on the budget and we're elected to hire personnel and manage the home and the jail."

It is a distinction that state Rep. Ray Gagnon, D-Claremont, who is vice chairman of the delegation, said stems from the different branches of government each body serves.

"County government is like a small state," he said. "Instead of a governor you have three commissioners ... the executive arm," Gagnon said. "The delegates act as the legislative wing and appropriate funds and give some overall direction in regards to the scope of county government."

While he said he had not seen Converse's bill and declined to speak on it specifically, Gagnon said that it was important the separation of powers be preserved.

"Members to the delegation should be engaged and aware and know what is going on," he said. "But I think we also have to be respectful of each body's responsibilities and duties."

Unfortunately, Gil de Rubio said the state statutes that guide their roles are somewhat fuzzy. He said rather than introducing a measure that would address a single issue for a single county, Converse's time would be better spent clarifying the laws by which counties operate statewide.

"The statutes regarding county government need a major overhaul," he said. "Some delineation needs to be set down. Right now, it is somewhat vague."

But in the meantime, Gagnon said a little talking would go a long way. After two years of clashing over 'Genesis' involvement in the county, he said better communication is needed regardless of what happens to Converse's bill.

"This is a demonstration of that deteriorating level of communication and perhaps what he is saying is there needs to be ongoing communication and involvement," Gagnon said. "If you're going to ask the county delegation to appropriate funds, they need to be at the table."

County Commissioner Jeff Barrett agreed.

"I think that if the commissioners are doing their job, the delegation should at least be a party to hiring talks," Barrett said. "Communication is the key in all aspects of government. Communication and openness are what is going to make the difference."

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